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NEWS

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NEW ALZHEIMER'S DRUG UNDER STUDY

Boston, Mass.--Researchers at Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) and the University Hospital (UH) are participating in a nationwide, multicenter clinical trial of nimodipine, a drug that may not only slow the progression of Alzheimer's disease, but also represents a new approach to the treatment of this disease.

Alzheimer's disease, which affects an estimated four million Americans, is a degenerative, neurological disorder characterized by progressive deterioration of intellectual, memory, language and behavioral functioning that ultimately leads to total debilitation. The brains of Alzheimer's patients have been found to be atrophied and deficient in certain neurotransmitters--particularly acetylcholine--and also contain excessive amounts of calcium.

Traditionally, the goal of treatment has been to improve the patient's functioning by attacking the symptoms. Drugs have primarily been used to replace the most commonly missing neurotransmitter--acetylcholine--which researchers believe may affect memory and language.

Nimodipine, on the other hand, is the first drug under study that potentially could slow the progression of the disease. A calcium blocker, nimodipine prevents excessive calcium--thought to contribute to brain cell death--from entering the cerebral blood vessels and being deposited in the brain cells.

The current double-blind study will involve 40 medical centers and nearly 1500 patients considered mildly to moderately ill. Patients receive

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baseline tests for memory, language and behavior before taking nimodipine or a placebo and are retested after 26 weeks.

"I believe the study is large enough and designed well enough to answer the questions we have about nimodipine's ability to slow the disease process. If the results are positive and significant, nimodipine could be an important breakthrough in the treatment of this devastating illness," says Sanford Auerbach, M.D., a neurologist at UH and an assistant professor of neurology at BUSM, who is conducting the trials.

The University Hospital, founded in 1855, is a principal teaching hospital of Boston University School of Medicine and a member of Boston University Medical Center.